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Elemental Beauty

Documentation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Art at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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May, 2013

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Artist Statement

I find nature to be an unending source of inspiration for my artwork, which includes a wide range of mixed media and crafts. In my work, I want to capture the essence of a single element of natural beauty, such as the undulations of grass in the breeze, the ripples of water on the shore, or the subtle swirl of clouds in a sunrise. I find that by bringing these natural images indoors, through my artwork, I can transform the space where it is displayed into a more restful and tranquil place.

In my mixed media, I combine my photographs and paintings into abstract landscapes. I begin my process with a series of digital photographs that I manipulate and transfer to canvas. Then, using paint I intensify the color and tone of the photographs. I also use gestural marks to soften the photographs, to imply a sense of movement in the imagery, and to give a more dynamic aspect to the artwork.

My craft pieces include installations, fibers, jewelry, and ceramics. The installations are created to evoke sensory experiences of natural elements. In these works, I incorporate sounds, smells, and tactile components. My fibers, jewelry, and ceramics rely on the visual aesthetics of natural patterns and lines.

Elemental Beauty

Introduction

I have always been creative and interested in the arts. By the time I was in middle school I was sewing my own clothing. Soon, I learned how to knit sweaters and scarves with intricate patterns. In high school, I focused on my craftwork as well as drawing. When I began studying art education as an undergraduate, I picked up a part-time job in marketing where I learned graphic design skills. At that point, I began to create the majority of my artwork digitally. With my bachelor's degree in Art Education, I began a job as an elementary school art teacher where I taught the basics of different art and craft techniques. However, I wanted to get my students to imbue meaning and use symbolism in their artwork. My own portfolio of work was lacking in these areas as well, I often simply followed patterns to create my pieces. I realized that I needed to add more conceptual meaning to my own work in order to understand how to expect the same from my students.

While teaching I heard about the Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Art (MIS-IAR) Off-Campus Program offered by Virginia Commonwealth University. I took my first class and I explored the history of symbolism and challenged myself to add meaning into every sketch and each piece of artwork I made. I felt that I was freed from observational representation and I started to experiment more with the materials I was using.

After this first experience, I decided to enroll in the degree program and concentrate in craft and mixed media. With these focus areas I could expand and combine some of my previous skills. I learned how to throw ceramic pots on a wheel, how to create installations, make jewelry out of precious metal clay, and even use digital photography in wearable art. I also learned how to use my graphic design skills and combine them with paintings I created on canvas.

In addition to expanding my knowledge of materials, I worked on adding more conceptual depth to my art. For instance, some of my installations explore my family's Ukrainian heritage which has a strong connection to nature and living off the land. Other works reference special places outdoors that I am emotionally connected to. Most of my two-dimensional work includes clouds and skies that are particular to a place I have visited and tied to a specific memory. Each piece of art I made now has a story and a meaning to it.

My Aesthetics

The inspiration for my artwork comes from the outdoors, where I find healing, tranquility, and a place for contemplation. These experiences have helped me through stressful moments in life, including the recent loss of a family member. I have also explored and studied simple natural rhythms, cycles of seasons, and times of day as a way of connecting to the environment. My senses are activated with the natural scents, sounds, and textures. These times outdoors have helped me reset the balance in my life. When I create my artwork, I focus on one particular environmental element in each work, so that the viewer can concentrate on that one feature. I also simplify the image featured and combine it with soft, cool colors to create a tranquil mood to my work. I hope to inspire that serenity in others.

Most of the imagery comes directly from nature, such as depictions of clouds, leaves, and water. Other times, the imagery includes man-made things which are often found outdoors, such as freshly laundered clothes on a clothesline or the white sails of boats billowing in the breeze. Sometimes, I refer to nature literally, such as when I use real grass or plants in my installations. Each piece of artwork is meant to inspire the viewer to notice the beauty that surrounds us. I feel that there is a great disconnection between modern day living and the abundance of beauty that

nature provides. As a computer graphics teacher, I spend a great portion of my day indoors and behind the screen of a computer. I feel a great sense of renewal and inspiration when I step outside to breathe fresh air and to absorb the abundance of beauty surrounding me. I hope that my viewers are reminded of that beauty when they see my work.

I use a variety of sewing, jewelry, and ceramic techniques when creating my craft pieces. I often combine media together, or use traditional media in a non-traditional way. For instance, I may sew the image of a landscape into a quilted flag using scraps of a particular item of clothing, or add digital photographs to my jewelry so it holds miniature works of art. I also have taken my ceramic work outdoors when creating an installation to give my artwork new meaning or imply a new function, such as a string of bowls that collect rain water and act as wind chimes rather than serve the purpose of holding food.

I create my mixed media collages to depict a particular memory of an outdoor place or aspect of nature. I focus on one particular element at a time to emphasize its singular beauty. I try to capture the essence of an outdoor experience, simply by depicting the sky at various times of day or in different weather conditions. When I try to recall a memory of a specific sunset, for example, what I see in my mind are fragments of the memories, parts of which are clear and parts of which are blurred. When I create my mixed media collages, the process is similar to the act of recalling a memory. Some of the photographs I transfer are clear, and other areas blur away like the forgotten details in memories. When I paint areas in, I use my imagination to fill in gaps that I do not clearly remember.

I begin by collecting photographs that I have of a specific place and I create a digital collage on the computer. Then, I transfer the image to canvas using a gel medium. Next, the paper is carefully removed leaving the inked image behind. I paint on top of the image in places

where the image did not transfer, and I repeat the gel medium image transfer process with a set of photographs that are digitally altered with brighter, deeper colors. Lastly, I paint on top in some places allowing the transferred photographs to show creating a colorful, layered collage. The result of this process is a visual interpretation of how I remember a scene with some parts clear, some parts blurred, and some parts enhanced with imagination.

Many of the places I photograph and feature in my work are local to the Washington, DC Metro area, and to New Mexico. In most of my work, the particular location is intentionally not recognizable to the viewer. This ambiguity allows the viewer to recall his or her own memory of a similar sunset, or glimpse of waves in water.

Influences

I found that my work was most strongly influenced by natural elements after a weeklong camping trip to New Mexico. I had seen photographs of the New Mexico landscape, and I had viewed artwork by artists that were inspired by the Southwest. I did not realize what a profound influence it would have on me and on my artwork until I experienced it myself. Camping while I was there made the experience even more memorable, since I was completely surrounded by the natural beauty. During the night, I slept under the dramatic sky illuminated by a full moon and stars, and listened to the sound of coyotes not far away. Each morning, I woke to a sky painted red by the clouds, and I spent the days walking through breezy fields and hiking mountains sprinkled with wildflowers. I was so surrounded by beauty that I could hardly pull myself away to return to a bustling world of technology and indoor activities. I wanted to make sure I preserved some of this feeling in my artwork for my own sake, and to remind my viewers to unplug and breathe some fresh air.

It was in New Mexico that I started to feel a connection to the artist Georgia O'Keeffe (1887-1986). While in Santa Fe, I explored the Georgia O'Keeffe Museum, and I realized that there was much more to the artist than the large sensual flowers that I associated with her. I started to enjoy her landscape paintings, especially after spending my days gazing at the same hills and rivers that inspired her artwork. I particularly liked the way she simplified her artwork as she abstracted it, smoothing the leaves of the trees and the fields as if she was painting a landscape draped in satin. After studying O'Keeffe's work, I started to simplify my-subject matter to singular elements of nature. These elements were also minimized and abstracted to simple and colorful designs. Each mixed media artwork I made was devoted to the array of colors in a sunrise, a close up of water ripples, or the detail of a single flower blossom.

My jewelry pieces also include photography from New Mexico, and while I was there I developed a new appreciation for Native American jewelry. I enjoyed the turquoise and silver work, and particularly the Zuni inlay jewelry. When I create my jewelry pieces I work in silver precious metal clay (PMC), a clay-like substance made from pure powdered silver that is mixed with a binder. After the jewelry pieces are sculpted and fired, the binder burns off leaving the pure silver behind. This versatile media has been a place where I could take my clay sculpting skills to a new level as I explored ways I could make my art wearable. I discovered that I could imbed my photography into my jewelry by the use of resin, similarly to how the colored stones are inlaid in Zuni silver jewelry.

After I discovered mixed media, I found inspiration in the work of the twin artists who work together, Mike and Doug Starn (b. 1961). The Starn's artwork, which became popular in the late 1980's, largely consisted of appropriated traditional images from art museums. However, it was their approach that interested me. They photographed and enlarged these well-

known images on to a large grid. The grid was made of small, equally-sized pieces of rectangular photo paper that were taped together. The result was a collage-like print of the overall image. The seams of the papers were often rough and distressed, and the tape often is visible. I find the irregular edges to add a beautiful, aged quality to the artwork.

Mike and Doug Starn were formally trained to create pristine photographic prints, and yet they chose to bend, wrinkle, and alter their photo paper which was previously seen as professionally unacceptable. When I use acrylic gel medium transfers in my mixed media, I often run into the challenge of how to transfer large images to canvas because of the limits in printing size from my computer printer. I solved this problem by printing my images in smaller portions that I would attach together like pieces of a puzzle. In some of my early works, I tried to carefully match the seams, but even with the greatest care there is the problem of shifting and gaps where the paper slightly overlaps. After I discovered the artwork and printing methods of the Starn twins, I worried less about how perfectly I was transferring the images to canvas and focused on the beauty of the collaged image instead. Without as much retouching, my artwork started to appear much more vivid and had much more visual interest.

With each mixed media piece I made, the more geometric my artwork became. The soft organic lines of the clouds and water ripples were contained in overlapping rectangles. Some rectangles were translucent and layered to create deep shadows, and in contrast, made the colors appear more vibrant. As I continued to abstract my work, I started to experiment with my clouds looking less identifiable as part of a sky, and they could just as easily be swirls of water viewed from above. I explored the geometry and contained elements of the design in dark rectangles that were aligned in a dark grid.

Mixed Media on Canvas

The method I use for my mixed media collages has gradually become more systematic. I proceed through the steps of transferring my photographs to canvas with gel medium and painting in select areas to enhance colors and define shapes. Each piece, intended to capture the essence of the beauty of nature, can vary in design due to the location or the particular inspiration. Some collages are composed of many images that capture a general memory and some focus on a single moment in time.

In *Taos* (Appendix, 1), I created several photographs of a sunrise over the Rio Grande River in Taos, New Mexico. As the sunrise developed, the colors became more vivid, and the light was captured in the clouds in different ways. This piece reflects the passage of time and it is depicted in the fragmented way in which I remember it. When creating this layered piece, I was taking great care in the craftsmanship as I transferred each image. I delicately painted in every seam to align the images perfectly. Here, I was inspired by O'Keeffe's landscapes of continuous mountains and the smoothness of her trees and sky. What actually happened with this piece was not what I had planned. When I printed the second layer of images to transfer onto the canvas, I mistakenly printed them at a 110% scale. Therefore, my process and outcome had changed due to my error. However, once the transfer of the second layer was complete, I was shocked at the result. The overlapping and out of register layers of rectangles created a soft kaleidoscope effect in the clouds. Although, I was initially inspired by O'Keeffe, the Starn twins work allowed me to reassess and appreciate the outcome of this piece.

In *Water at Night* (Appendix, 2) I simplified my process. The image is an enlargement of a few ripples of water that seemed to sparkle on a clear summer day. Instead of transferring my photographic images to a bare, white canvas, I created an underpainting of blue and transferred

only one layer of the image. This time, I decided to leave the seams between the layered images showing. The dark underpainting softened the highlights of the transferred image, and rather than hand painting them back in, I left them dark and murky. By leaving the seams visible and not overpainting, I wanted to give the ripples of water and the darkness of the picture a serene, and yet mysterious quality.

Next, I returned to my photographs of New Mexico for inspiration. I found a set of photographs I took off the side of the road as I crossed the plains for what seemed to stretch on infinitely. The sky had turned dark as rainclouds rolled in, and the bare, open landscape allowed a clear open view of the scene. I created the mixed media piece, *Middle of Nowhere* (Appendix, 3) from the set of photographs. I enclosed the dark, swirling clouds in dark rectangles that form an irregular grid across the canvas. Some images are so obscured that it is difficult to tell if the images are of clouds or water. The depth of the dark smoky grays and blacks I used were intended to present an image that has no sense of time and no particular location.

These mixed media pieces may vary in size or in particular imagery, but when placed together, the theme of singular, natural elements runs through each work. They act as a collection of memories, like souvenirs from places I have visited and when I view them. I feel that a part of me returns to that particular location where I can vividly remember the sights, sounds, scents, and feelings or my surroundings.

Craft

The nature theme in my mixed media art often carries over into my craft work. With my jewelry, I incorporate my nature photography into my silver as I inlay it with resin. In other pieces, such as my ceramic installations, I explore how an outdoor environment can completely

change the context of my work. Even in more literal representations of moments I have experienced, I relay through my quilted work a strong connection to nature as I depict an outdoor scene, where the natural setting and lighting are an important part of my memory.

In *Campfire Bracelet* (Appendix, 4), I made a bracelet pendant that was inspired from photography from my trip to New Mexico. It was also heavily influenced by jewelry I frequently saw in shops and sold on the streets by Zuni artists. Through history, the Zuni tribe was well known for their exquisite inlay work, where many pieces of precious stones are carefully inserted into silver jewelry without the use of glues or other adhesives. The stones stay in place due to the precision of their cut and the tension of the silver surround. Each piece was carefully crafted by a silversmith and lapidary who possessed skills that were passed on from previous generations. In *Campfire Bracelet*, I included imbedded photographs of the elements earth, air, fire and water, instead of stones. Each photograph was cut into a tiny piece to symbolize the fragment of a memory, in this case that of an evening campfire. The images were set in the silver and then covered with resin. I treated the images as if they were precious stones carefully and expertly inlaid together. The bracelet pendant is strapped onto the wrist with a turquoise silk ribbon, the color reminiscent of the turquoise stones that are so precious to the Zuni people.

While I was teaching elementary art, I was gifted a potter's wheel to enhance the ceramics curriculum at my school. I had very little experience on the wheel before teaching, and I knew that I wanted to practice throwing bowls and also document my progress. I created *Heritage Tree* (Appendix, 5) while doing so. I challenged myself to throw one hundred bowls on the wheel of various sizes, in hope that I could perfect my throwing skills. I started by creating many different bowls, and I stacked them while I worked. After I observed my stack of bowls

get larger and larger, I noticed how the smaller bowls nested inside the larger ones, much like the wooden Russian nesting dolls I played with as a child. My family is of Ukrainian heritage and we have many Russian and Ukrainian mementos.

I decided to create an installation from these bowls, and I discovered that by piercing each bowl with a hole before firing, I could string them together in long strands that appeared to visually stack when held vertically. To pay homage to my Ukrainian heritage, I researched more into Ukrainian crafts when creating *Heritage Tree*. My family also practiced the traditional art of egg dying, using wax resist methods, at Easter each year. I wanted to combine the basic principles of wax resist dying with ceramic techniques before I hung my installation, and I discovered a waxy underglaze product that would mimic the egg dying process. I painted the black wax underglaze in traditional Ukrainian patterns on the bowls and then glazed the bowls red in areas that were exposed. When fired, the wax melted off and neatly outlined the red patterns. After the bowls were strung together, I hung the strands from a tree and they spun and clinked together in the wind like chimes, and later when it started to rain, the bowls collected water. The outdoor setting became an essential part of my installation, and the way the wind and water created movement and sound turned my sculpture into an installation where the viewer could stand under it and experience it through visual, auditory, and tactile senses.

One of my craft pieces stands out from the rest of my work because of its literal representation of a memory rather than featuring photographs of places I have been, natural imagery, or symbols of my heritage. When my father passed away unexpectedly in 2008, I turned to knitting and sewing as a way to get my mind off the difficult situation, and keeping my hands busy with repetitive motions helped to calm myself. I also found that by running outdoors in the fresh air, I was able to sort through my thoughts and feel in control, when most of the time

I felt quite helpless. During this time, I decided to train for the Marine Corps Marathon in his memory since he was a former Marine, and I frequently ran an early morning route through Arlington, Virginia.

One morning before sunrise, I ran a longer distance than usual through Arlington Cemetery and up a steep hill to the Iwo Jima Memorial where the finish line would be for the upcoming race. It was my first time running up this hill, and I had a powerful flashback to a time I had visited this place as a child with my father. As a Marine, this place was of special significance to him. The surroundings were hauntingly beautiful, and under the full moon the gravestones in the cemetery seemed to glow. I created *Flag for My Father* (Appendix, 6) after this powerful experience. The story behind the artwork is important to the meaning, and the image is a literal representation of the landscape from the location in Arlington Cemetery. All the materials of the flag are created using scraps of running gear, such as zippers, shoe laces, reflectors, and rip stop nylon. The running path is outlined by the zipper that appears to visually unzip as it disappears into the horizon. The graves stones from the cemetery are made of small reflectors, and the layers of nylon create the hills that are embroidered with neon reflective threads. The stars in the sky are punched out from metal eyelets, and the flag itself is hung by shoelaces. When the piece is hung, it gently drapes like a ceremonial flag hung on the wall. Each time I look at the piece, I vividly remember the chill of that morning and the eerie, calm feeling I felt.

My craft work is diverse, and yet I continue my theme of memories and experiences in each piece I create, most of which include something from the outdoors. Through specific photographs, patterns, imagery, or by literally being placed outside I find ways to reflect on special moments. The repetitive process of their creation calms me and the theme of the work

helps me to recall a meaningful place or time.

Conclusion

Aside from the many techniques I learned while in the MIS-IAR Program, such as how to transfer images onto canvas and how to perfect throwing pots on a wheel, the most important lesson I learned was how imbed meaning into my work through symbolism and imagery. I realized how my artwork has a much more valuable place in my life when I reflect on experiences, memories, and matters of personal importance when I create my artwork. My work has become more conceptual, and much more than simply visually pleasing.

I discovered how important it is for my students to add meaning in their work, and how to discuss their ideas with their peers. I realized how after I shared my own ideas with my classmates and colleagues. I could problem solve and explore new possibilities to a much greater extent than if I had tackled each artwork by myself. I now make sure my students are equipped with the vocabulary and the essential questions that are necessary as they learn how to discuss art, and how to help each other through the creative process.

I feel the need to constantly explore with my work, and I enjoy learning new skills while keeping my hands busy. I find my work helps me slow myself down and focus. Each piece that I make somehow seems to reference nature in some way, whether it is through the patterns and imagery I include or an outdoor experience I am reflecting on. I have fond memories of being outdoors, and I feel that by including natural imagery reminiscent of those experiences I can recall the tranquility I seek.

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Appendix

List of Figures

- Figure 1. *Taos*, acrylic and mixed media, 24" x 36", 2011.
- Figure 2. *Water at Night*, acrylic and mixed media, 18" x 24", 2012.
- Figure 3. *Middle of Nowhere*, acrylic and mixed media, 36" x 24", 2012.
- Figure 4. *Campfire Bracelet*, silver, resin, and silk, 1" x 2" x 0.25", 2012.
- Figure 5. *Heritage Tree*, ceramic bowls and string, 120" x 8" x 8" (each strand), 2011.
- Figure 6. *Flag for my Father*, nylon, reflectors, zippers, and rivets, 18" x 24", 2011.



Figure 1. *Taos*, acrylic and mixed media, 24" x 36", 2011.

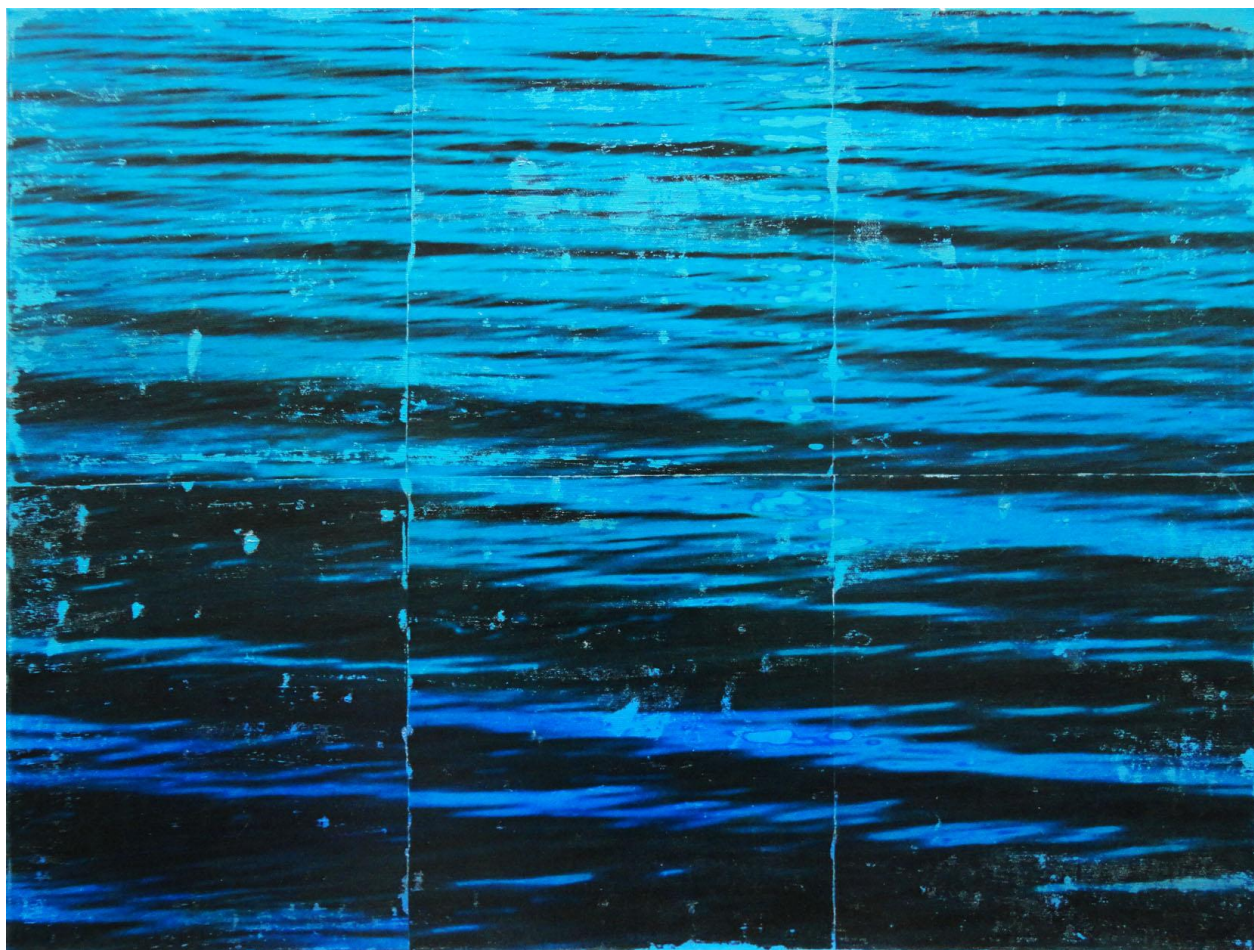


Figure 2. *Water at Night*, acrylic and mixed media, 18" x 24", 2012.

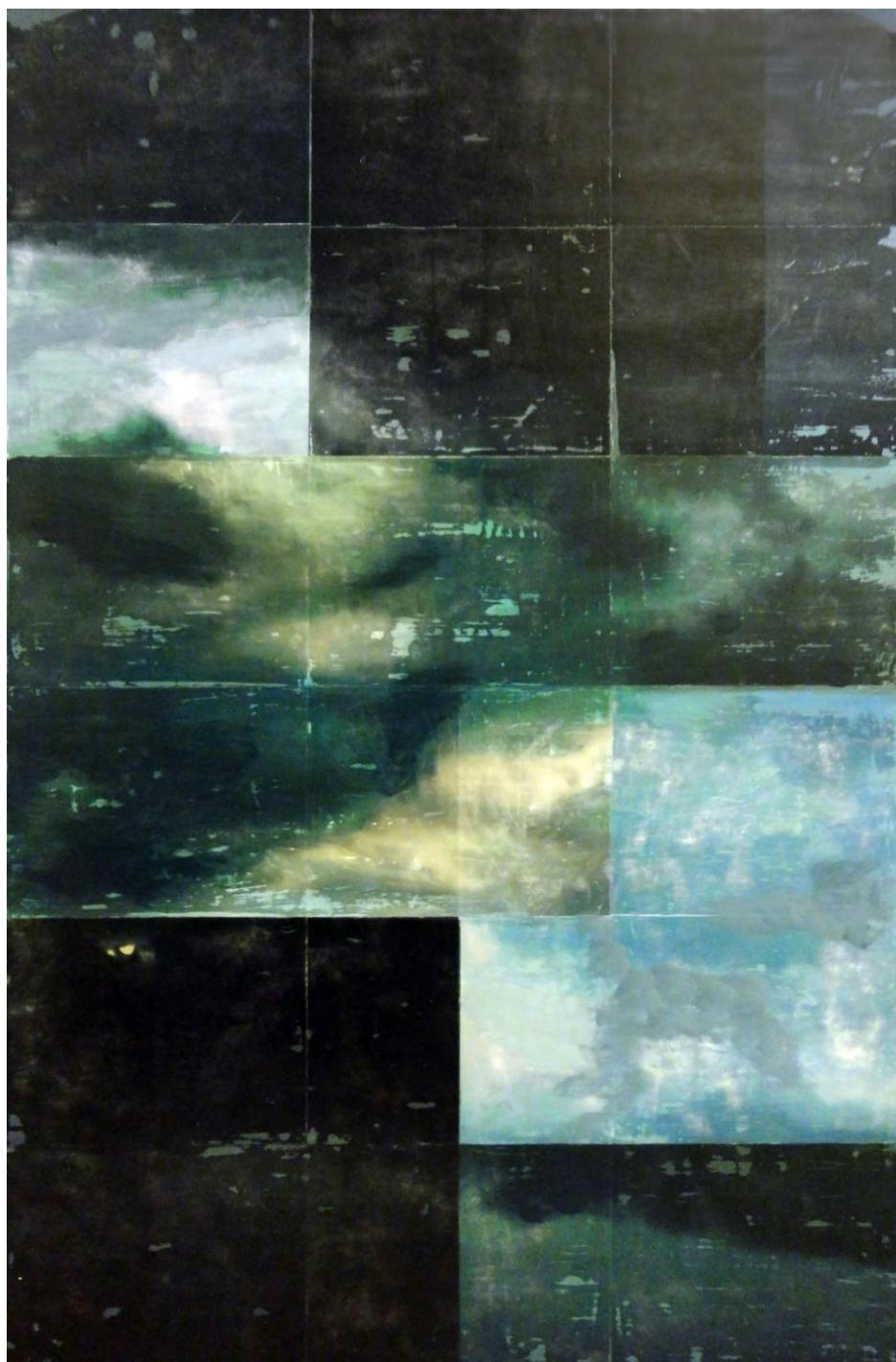


Figure 3. *Middle of Nowhere*, acrylic and mixed media, 36" x 24", 2012.



Figure 4. *Campfire Bracelet*, silver, resin, and silk, 1" x 2" x 0.25", 2012.



Figure 5. *Heritage Tree*, ceramic bowls and string, 120" x 8" x 8" (each strand), 2011.

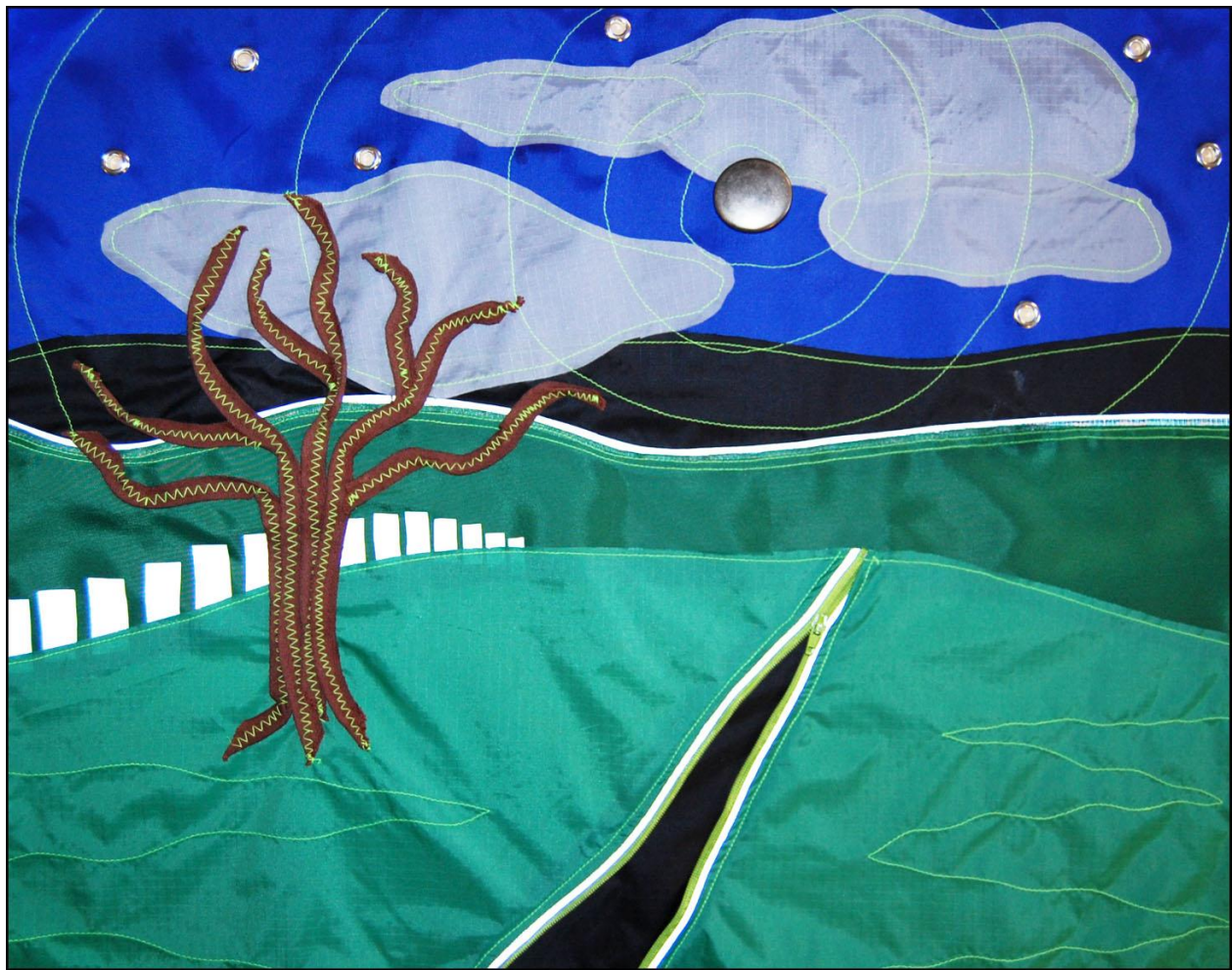


Figure 6. *Flag for my Father*, nylon, reflectors, zippers, and rivets, 18" x 24", 2011.

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- 2010, 2012 *Fairfax County Artist Teacher Exhibition*, Richard J. Ernst Community Cultural Center, Northern Virginia Community College, Annandale, Virginia.